Review essay: Global technologies of sperm donation from conception to connection

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Rikke Andreassen
Mediated Kinship: Gender, Race and Sexuality in Donor Families
London and New York: Routledge, 2019, £115.00 hbk, (ISBN: 978-0-8153-7795-5) 190pp.

Rosanna Hertz and Margaret K. Nelson
Random Families: Genetic Strangers, Sperm Donor Siblings, and the Creation of New Kin
New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, $27.95 hbk, (ISBN: 978-0-19-088827-5)) 296pp.

Sebastian Mohr
Being a Sperm Donor: Masculinity, Sexuality, and Biosociality in Denmark
New York: Berghahn, 2018, £85.00 hbk, (ISBN: 978-1-78533-946-2) 185pp.

Ayo Wahlberg
Good Quality: The Routinization of Sperm Banking in China
Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018, £29.00 pbk, (ISBN: 978-0-520-29778-4) 229pp.

The sociological study of Assistive Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) is situated within a landscape that is continuously shifting. New technologies are developed as legislation catches up with the implications of the old ones. Cohorts of donor-conceived children[i] born in the early days of donor insemination (and their parents) are likely to have different experiences to those born today, where identity-release donation[ii] has become much more common and, moreover, other technologies have also developed and changed. The internet allows for instantaneous communication between people who have never met in person, facilitated by the social media applications that are now ubiquitous in everyday life. This is fertile ground for connections between those linked via donated gametes to develop. While the debate about how new forms of kinship and relatedness emerge within the context of ARTs has been ongoing in the field for quite some time, these technological shifts mean that there is space for the new perspectives offered by these books. Moreover, the empirical studies in the books considered in this essay cover geographically diverse research sites: China, Denmark, the USA. When viewed comparatively, similarities and differences in both practices and organisation of clinics and the lived experiences of those involved in the globalised field of sperm donation begin to emerge.

Mediated Kinship, the first of the four books I will discuss in this essay, is an explicitly feminist examination of how social media is used in the formation of kinship networks based around gamete donation, with particular regard to the experiences of 'alternative families'. Rikke Andreassen positions herself as a research insider, describing how she shared her own

story of queer motherhood with her interview participants: lesbian and solo mothers who are members of a Danish-based Scandinavian Facebook Donor Group which facilitates contact between the parents of 'donor siblings' who are offspring of the same sperm donor. Andreassen also directly analysed discussions posted on the Facebook group itself as well as making use of an unusual 'going along with' approach to online social research, pioneered by her PhD student (Jørgensen, 2016); this method allows the researcher to directly observe how online applications are used by participants. She describes how the mediation of kinship via technology is a dynamic process of entanglement, with new families emerging and becoming family members with others who are connected within existing kinship networks. The book provides a compelling account of the uncertainty of position experienced by non-biological mothers when locating themselves within networks based on shared genes and narratives of resemblance, situated against the wider struggle for recognition of the legitimacy of lesbian parenthood.

Random Families similarly explores the relationships that emerge online through networks of people linked by ARTs and shared genes. Hertz and Nelson divide their book into two parts, the first giving an overview of the context and landscape of gamete donation in which the networks emerge, and the second comparing and contrasting five case studies of donor sibling networks. Their data was collected via interviews at various sites across the USA; the interviewees were primarily female recipients of donor sperm (and sometimes eggs or embryos) and their children, although some donors, recipient fathers, and other family members were also included. The networks that Hertz and Nelson selected for case study had all initially connected via the online Donor Sibling Registry but had transferred contact to the offline sphere. They represent different age cohorts and different eras in the history of donor conception, and provide a fascinating glimpse into the varied ways in which these networks interact. One of these areas of contrast was around interpersonal dynamics and how the members of each network related to one another, with some networks forming subgroups among the children or, indeed, among their mothers. In all cases, the network core consisted of women and children—the donor was rarely present, and they found that his appearance always altered the group dynamic.

Donors and their lived experience are the focus of Sebastian Mohr's *Being a Sperm Donor*. This is an in-depth ethnography based on interviews and observations with sperm donors and staff at multiple Danish sperm banks. Building on a range of theory drawn from across disciplines including sociology and science and technology studies, Mohr uses the concept of biosociality to argue that institutionalised donation practices, including ongoing surveillance and transgressions of personal space and sexuality, alter men's self-perceptions and ways of being a man. The book is grounded in the specificity of the Danish context, with continuous reference to the laws and ways of organising that shape the experiences of Danish donors. Mohr also provides detailed descriptions of the everyday practices and practicalities of being a sperm donor, some of which have rarely been touched upon in previous accounts of sperm donation. This includes everything from intimate problems of donation, such as the need to adapt one's masturbation technique when attempting to hit a small plastic cup, to sensory details such as the particular odour of the donation cabins. Mohr concludes the book by stating that his goal was to make visible the mundane encounters which go unnoticed, and through this unflinching examination of both the everyday experiences of donors and of researching donors, I would argue he has succeeded.

In *Good Quality*, Ayo Wahlberg gives a meticulously researched, in-depth ethnographic account of the development and subsequent routinisation of sperm banking in China, drawing on 8 years-worth of observation, interviews and documentary data. Wahlberg contextualises his analysis through reference to the Cultural Revolution, to a history of restrictive Chinese family planning policies such as the One-child Policy, and to cultural understandings of filial duty and of sperm as 'life essence'. Of particular note is the account of the early experiments performed by Lu Guangxiu and Zhang Lizhu, the two women responsible for, Wahlberg argues strongly, developing ART techniques locally in response to local concerns, rather than simply adopting them as an inevitable result of globalisation. Wahlberg goes on to describe routinisation of sperm banking as a socio-historical process harnessed by the Chinese state as a method of controlling population quantity and quality, following a history of eugenic practice—however, he also points out the links between ARTs and eugenics globally. Throughout the book, he follows a clear line of argument regarding the assessment and valuation of life in China, where falling birth rates and falling sperm quality serve as metaphors for industrialisation and its consequences, such as pollution. This continues through the description of how Chinese sperm donors are recruited on university campuses, mobilised as donors through various methods, including appeals to personal pride and the societal good, and 'cultivated' as 'lively' donors producing clean, safe technosemen.

Technologies of kinship

Both *Mediated Kinship* and *Random Families* address a similar topic—online donor sibling networks—although each book comes at this from a slightly different perspective. Andreassen explores the experiences of mothers facilitating contact with donor siblings for their children, including their reasons for choosing to (or not to) make contact with such siblings. Although some of the mothers she interviewed were themselves donor-conceived, this was not the focus of the analysis. Hertz and Nelson, by contrast, collected data from a broader range of interviewees, including donor-conceived children of varying ages. Their analysis is therefore less specific, but offers insight into the ways that offspring themselves experience their relationships with one another. Both books emphasise 'normalising work' done by lesbian couples in order to legitimate themselves as responsible parents. Andreassen uses Ahmed's (2010) concept of 'happy objects' to theorise why lesbian and solo mothers might choose to search for donor siblings of their children; as both sets of women have deviated from established modes of heteronormative family formation, siblings may constitute 'happy objects' which bring them closer to the 'ideal' family form. Hertz and Nelson also report 'normalising work' done by recipient parents of all types, in order to validate their method of family creation, their decision to use a donor, and their decision to use that specific donor. Though a limited number of fathers and donors are included in Hertz and Nelson's work, it was clear in both texts that the bulk of the work being done around network formation is being done by women.

However, as both of these books show, not all donor recipients (or donor-conceived children) are interested in seeking donor siblings. In the final chapter of *Good Quality*, Wahlberg draws on data from interviews with ten heterosexual recipient couples (this is another example of the variation present in sperm donation legislation, as lesbian couples and single women are not legally able to access donor sperm in China). Each of the couples said that they would never disclose to their child that they were donor-conceived, and were not interested in knowing more about him than the limited biological and social information

provided by the sperm bank. It may be that the shift towards more openness in donor conception that has taken place in other countries may yet occur in China; however, Wahlberg argues convincingly that filial piety and the strong cultural imperative to produce sons and pass on one's lineage continues to inform the ways in which donation is understood within Chinese families. The consequent fear of consanginous marriage was also present within Wahlberg's data—as it was in all four books.

While Andreassen and Hertz and Nelson engage with the traditional framework of kinship, Mohr argues that biogenetic connections between donors and donor-conceived children may not be understood within that framework by donors and calls for a new way of framing and thinking about these kinds of conections. He uses Klotz' concept of 'wayward relations' to theorise how such (potential) relationships might be made meaningful—wayward relations exist alongside kinship relations, and are part of how donor-conceived children exert agency over a context in which they lack knowledge (i.e. around to whom they are connected). Ambivalence towards potential donor connections was a theme in all four books. Andreassen in particular describes how non-biological lesbian mothers felt that such connections threatened their own family and position within the family unit. Mohr's participants experience a moral imperative to protect their own family from 'outside interference' from donor-conceived children, and seek ways of engaging as sperm donors to ensure that this can be achieved—for example, choosing anonymous donation. Even donors who had engaged in private, known donation had stated that they did not intend to build a family. Mohr argues that donors therefore clearly define the boundaries of 'family', marking who is considered part of their family and who is not. However, it seems important to note here that in none of these books did connecting with donor kinship networks transform participants' family units or ways of doing daily family life. This is emphasised by Hertz and Nelson in their conclusion: the most significant relationships emerging from the networks formed around sperm donation are the ones participants choose to develop.

Donors without borders

International success in their provision of donor sperm means that Danish sperm banks have been the subject of much attention, both from academics and journalists. Both Mohr and Andreassen draw on characteristics of the Danish system to illuminate their analysis. Within her examination of race in sperm donation, Andreassen explores how Danish sperm has been marketed as 'Viking' sperm, particularly with regard to its use by British women and the ways in which this has been discussed in the media. While sperm and 'Viking masculinity' is not a novel subject (see e.g. Kroløkke, 2009), Andreassen also chooses to grapple with the issue of race, and specifically the construction of whiteness—a topic which is rarely directly addressed in the literature around ARTs. She argues compellingly that, while these technologies theoretically invite a challenge to racialised ideas of nation, they more frequently contribute to a monoracial, white form of reproduction. However, as she notes herself, her sample is limited and there is a need for further work on the racial implications of sperm donation.

Perhaps the most novel and important aspect of *Being a Sperm Donor* is the way in which it approaches the visceral reality of donating sperm. Moreover, within his discussion of the 'male shame' of physical examinations of donors by sperm bank staff, Mohr gives a stark account of his own experience of male shame during the process of observing such intimate

interactions. This reflexive detail is extremely powerful and contributes to a deeper understanding of how these processes may be experienced by the donors. However, while much of Mohr's analysis situated donors within their social and family context in addition to the wider Danish context, their partners and family members were not included in the data. Though this may have been beyond the scope of this study, future work in this area might benefit from the involvement of these additional perspectives.

Similarly, while *Good Quality* provides a fascinating account of the cultural specificity of sperm donation in China, it devotes little attention to the donor recipients and offspring; this is perhaps unsurprising, as Wahlberg describes his work as an 'assemblage ethnography' rather than ethnography of lived experience. Nevertheless, there is certainly space for further work to explore in more depth the relationships between actors in the context of Chinese sperm donation. Given recent attention in the scientific literature to the ways in which gendered expectations can shape the careers of female scientists, I would also have been interested in knowing something of how it figured in the experiences of Lu Guangxiu and Zhang Lizhu.

One of the most interesting aspects of the donor sibling networks described in *Random Families* was the variety of naming conventions used when talking about the donor and each other, with one network using the neologism 'dibling' to describe a donor sibling; this speaks to wider debates within the field of ART research around what language to use when describing the relationships between various actors within networks formed through gamete donation. The inclusion of the perspectives of children in their work is also a strength. However, while some of the participants in Hertz and Nelson's study had used donor eggs or embryos, it was striking that all of the networks described were formed around donor sperm. None of their egg donor respondents had made contact with their donor or donor siblings, but it is unclear whether this is because donor sibling networks never organise around offspring of the same egg donor. There is scope for future study in this area.

A strength of all four of these books lies in the in-depth, qualitative empirical data each presents. Due to the secretive nature of gamete donation practices, particularly in the past, participants have often been difficult to access. Many previous studies of donors and donor families have therefore been quantitative in nature, or have at least relied heavily on survey methods with limited qualitative questions. These books therefore make an important contribution to a deeper overall sociological understanding of the practices of ARTs and sperm donation in particular. When taken together as a group, they provide a good overview of how similar or different practices are in different cultural contexts, in terms of the technologies of sperm donation are organised and how donors are mobilised as well as how those who are entangled within the networks formed by these technologies relate to one another.

Notes:

[i] The question of how best to describe children born of donated gametes is an ongoing debate within the field. Mohr uses 'donor-conceived individuals' to describe such children. Andreassen and Hertz and Nelson use 'donor-conceived children' (Hertz and Nelson specifically reflect on their use of the language of their participants). Wahlberg uses 'donor offspring'. For consistency, I have chosen to use 'donor-conceived children' within this essay, while recognising that this may not have been the term used in a particular work and carries with it a particular set of implications.

ii In the UK context, the laws around donor anonymity were changed in 2005. All egg, sperm and embryo donors who donated after this date are 'identity-release' donors, which means that donor-conceived children can request their donor's full name and contact details once they reach the age of 18. In some other countries, such as China, anonymous donation is still the norm, where only brief information such as physical characteristics collected at the time of donation is available about each donor. In Denmark and the USA, donors can choose whether to be anonymous or identity-release, and recipient parents have the choice of which kind of donor to use.

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